



I am Erin Perpetua, President of School Nutrition Association of Connecticut (SNACT), which is the professional organization representing Connecticut's school nutrition professionals. I am also the Food Service Director for Norwich Public Schools. I am testifying on behalf of SNACT on **SB 929 AN ACT EXPANDING SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS TO PROVIDE FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS**

CT's school nutrition professionals began serving students nutritious meals at no cost to families at the start of the pandemic. We have seen the benefits that accrue to students and communities when school meals are treated as what they are- an integral contribution to a student's educational success. School meals play a vital role in leveling the educational playing field- just like books, buses and libraries. Providing free meals for all students—regardless of income—is a proven strategy to reduce food insecurity, support learning, improve mental and physical health, and bolster educational and economic equity.

Our current paid meals model leaves far too many behind, including families struggling to make ends meet while hovering just above the Federal income limits for free school meals, which are woefully inadequate for a high cost of living state such as Connecticut.

How can a family of 4 with a gross income of a little over \$51,300 afford school meals after they pay:

- Taxes
- Childcare expenses
- Housing
- Utilities
- Health care
- Groceries - which has and will continue to rapidly accelerate
- All other necessities which have all affected by skyrocketing inflation

It is estimated that a gross income of \$90,000 for a family of 4 is needed to keep a family above the poverty level in Connecticut. Qualified students hesitate to take free meals due to the stigma and shame associated with providing free meals to only certain students.

Transitioning back to paid meals has caused trauma and uncertainty for:

- Students
- Their families

- School staff (including their administration)
- Suppliers including our state's farmers.

The stories we have heard:

- Students stigmatized and fearful of taking school meals
- Parents calling asking for help when there is nothing that can be done
- Mounting unpaid meal debt - that schools districts are responsible for if left unpaid
- Suppliers and farmers describing the sharp drop in ordering from schools who no longer can support buying local

These stories are heartbreaking and go on and on.

It's time for CT to step up and join the multiple other states that have already passed legislation ensuring that all students have meals as part of their school day regardless of their perceived ability to pay. School meals should be treated the same as all other aspects of learning services. Students do not have to scan their ID in order to decide if they should be charged for a ride on the bus. Most students have computers at home but that does not impact the funding for Chromebooks for every student.

We ask why are school meals the only part of the school day that is based on financial income? It is time to make meals equal to all other services provided. Students need to be able to learn and a hungry child cannot learn. All students should be able to access school meals - regardless of having money, so they can focus on the important test or assignment they have, not on the growling stomach.

We hope that the Connecticut Legislature and Governor Lamont will take the necessary steps to appropriate the funds for school meals guaranteeing that every student in CT has access to **healthy school meals at no charge as an integral part of the educational experience.**

Thank you.

Erin Perpetua

SNACT 2022-2023 President